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SUBJECT: MGLE01: JUMBLATT RECOUNTS SAUDI TRIP, MONEY
PROBLEMS, SYRIAN THREATS

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (S/NF) In a 7/7 meeting, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt said he had recently asked Saudi King Abdullah for funding to help him and his "March 14" allies counter Iranian/Syrian influence in Lebanon. King Abdullah had been noncommittal, and Jumblatt was left waiting for his partner Sa'ad al-Hariri's "caravans loaded with gold and emeralds" to arrive. Jumblatt said he understood from other high-ranking Saudi officials that Syrian military intelligence chief Asif Shawkat had, days earlier, visited Saudi Arabia to deliver what appeared to be a veiled threat, leaving King Abdullah furious at the SARG. End summary.

TRIP TO JEDDAH, CAP IN HAND

¶2. (C/NF) In a July 7 meeting with the Ambassador and Embassy staff, Jumblatt described his recent visit to Saudi Arabia as an effort to persuade Saudi King Abdullah to fund the "March 14" political alliance as a way of blocking an ongoing wave of "Shiite expansionism" in Lebanon and elsewhere in the region. This was a reference to Hizballah; its primary backer, Iran; and their Alawite-led ally, Syria.

¶3. (C/NF) King Abdullah was noncommittal in a July 4 meeting in Jeddah, however. In response to Jumblatt's request, "he just looked at me," Jumblatt recalled. King Abdullah's predecessor, King Fahd, had been "more generous," Jumblatt said wistfully.

¶4. (C/NF) Jumblatt was candid about his needs for external funding as a "za'eem," a communal leader, in a political system in which patronage is all-important. He recalled that, when former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri was alive -- a time when Jumblatt's situation was not nearly so difficult as it is now -- Hariri subsidized him to a tune of USD three million per year. In the current situation, Jumblatt estimated that he needed at least that much, probably more. But he has not found a source to replace the generosity of Rafiq Hariri.

WAITING FOR HARIRI'S "CARAVANS" TO COME IN

¶5. (C/NF) Instead of being embarrassed at going begging, Jumblatt delighted in recalling a letter he had recently written to his "March 14" partner, Sa'ad al-Hariri, Rafiq's second-born son and political heir. In it, he had expressed hope that Hariri's "caravans loaded with gold and emeralds had made it safely across the Empty Quarter," in which case Hariri might be willing to spare Jumblatt "a few small pennies." In a touch that Jumblatt found particularly hilarious, he had signed his letter, "The Poor Servant."

¶6. (C/NF) Comment: As Jumblatt and his close political allies, such as Telecommunications Minister Marwan Hamadeh, have pointed out to us in previous meetings, Hariri has provided no funding to Jumblatt since the 2005 parliamentary elections. Hariri continues to have problems collecting the billions of USD that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia reportedly owes his family's business enterprises. End comment.

PAYING THE BILLS

¶7. (C/NF) Jumblatt said that has no problem covering his personal expenses. His sources of revenue include Lebanon's Kefraya winery, of which he is a major stakeholder. Kefraya's annual profit amounts to approximately USD 200,000. In addition, Jumblatt owns a gasoline distribution network that earns him another USD 100,000 per year.

¶8. (C/NF) While this is enough to pay the bills of a 21st-century equivalent of a feudal lord -- the exquisitely furnished stone castle in the Chouf mountains, the household staff, a Range Rover or two -- it is nowhere near the amount needed to meet the expectations of Jumblatt's constituents. Jumblatt pointed out that this is particularly the case in a relatively low-income, economically undeveloped area, such as

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his native, Druze-dominated Chouf mountain region.

KEEPING UP WITH AOUN IS EXPENSIVE

¶9. (C/NF) Jumblatt said that Saatchi & Saatchi Levant, the Beirut-based element of the global advertising and public relations firm, had submitted a proposal for a media campaign for "March 14." While such a campaign could put "March 14" on an equal footing with the Hizballah-allied Free Patriotic Movement of Michel Aoun, Saatchi & Saatchi's price was USD 15 million, a figure far beyond the collective current means of the "March 14" leadership. (Note: The firm's head, Eli Khoury, was a major force behind the highly effective "branding" of protests that followed Rafiq al-Hariri's assassination -- culminating in the massive demonstration in Beirut on March 14, 2005 -- which featured the distinctive white-on-red "Independence 05" logo. End note.)

SHAWKAT VISIT: A VEILED THREAT TO THE SAUDIS?

¶10. (S/NF) Jumblatt said that, while still in Jeddah, he met with the Director of the Saudi General Intelligence Presidency, Prince Muqrin, and the Head of the Saudi National Security Council, Prince Bandar. From them, he learned that Asif Shawkat, chief of Syrian military intelligence (and brother-in-law of Syrian President Asad) had visited Saudi Arabia just four days earlier. While there, Shawkat met with Prince Mohammad bin Na'if (whom Jumblatt described as the Saudi equivalent of General Ashraf Rifi, Director-General of Lebanon's Internal Security Forces). Shakwat reportedly warned Mohammad bin Na'if that Saudi Arabia risked facing an increased threat of terrorist attacks.

¶11. (S/NF) When asked if the Saudis had interpreted Shawkat's warning as a threat -- along the lines of President

Asad's claim in a recent newspaper interview that Lebanon was at risk of being attacked by "al-Qa'ida," Jumblatt replied, "It is a threat." He understood from Bandar and Muqrin that Shawkat's message, added to what Jumblatt and Egyptian President Mubarak had already told King Abdullah about Syrian intentions, made King Abdullah "furious" at the SARG. Shawkat had sought an audience with King Abdullah, but was turned down, according to Jumblatt.

FELTMAN